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Ill.; Miss Julia Getteny, High School, Moline, Ill.; Miss Lilian Brownfield, High School, South Bend, Ind.

The committee is to investigate, so far as it may be able, the English curricula in the conference schools, and to report its findings. If possible, the report is to include answers to these questions:

1. What, if any, books or authors (outside the requirements) seem to persist in the course of study?
2. Does any special period seem to be favored by the books not on the required list; i. e., seventeenth century? contemporary?
3. Is there any general opinion among the teachers as to the present value of the required classics?

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## THE ENGLISH TEACHER AND THE SPELLING QUESTION <sup>1</sup>

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I am sure that the committee will make no objection if I take a little liberty with the program, and read the topics anew in an interrogative form: What can the English teacher do about the spelling question? What is the English teacher's duty toward outside reading? And the audience will permit me to interrogate them on the two problems that are nearest my heart as a teacher.

Personally, the connotation of those three words, "the spelling question," is most memorable. They are associated for me with more than mere classroom perplexities, and go back to the very beginning of my intellectual and spiritual experience. Again, through the eyes of a very little girl I see my mother by the lamp at the library table, and opposite her an irritated, boyish face bent over a soiled spelling-book. I hear the book slam down and a voice say: "Mother, I can't learn the old stuff! What's the use of having *cough* spell cough, and *tough* spell tough, and *through* spell through, and *dough* spell dough? I'll be plagued if I want to learn a crazy language like that! Why doesn't someone straighten it out?" And then I wait eagerly to hear what mother is going to

<sup>1</sup> Read at the conference of the Department of English.

say, for surely she is going to tell why the language is so crazy, and then straighten it all out. But when she only smiles, and then quickly grows serious again and says, "Come, dear, nobody could answer so big a question all at once. The language has been growing that way for centuries, and every queer word has a wonderful story about why it is so queer, and you will hear all the stories some day, if you are sensible and manly and get into college"—when mother gives that gentle, unanswering answer, I come in contact, for the first time, with a perplexity that is a problem.

And just as inexplicable is the problem today to me and to all other teachers. Indeed, so obstinately has this spelling difficulty defied us that it has assumed an almost tragic prominence in our modern education. Quite as firmly does it refuse to explain itself or to tell us the price that will buy it off, and so leave discouraged teachers more time and more inspiration for pleasanter work. Unanswerable as the problem appears, however, I am sure that if we look carefully at the conditions that have made it so serious a matter, we shall come somewhat nearer a happy solution. It is certainly but the inevitable result of the changes that have given us our present system of education. And since spelling is the only study that is seriously at fault today—the only part of education that has suffered in the upheavals of the last forty years—must it not bear a very nice relation to these same changes and upheavals? Since it has grown worse as everything else has grown better, is not its present condition significant of something not yet perfected in the matter and the method of our study? A perfect system sacrifices nothing. Since spelling is the victim under the existing system, does not its faultiness denote some inherent and vital weakness therein? Is it not the heel in our young Achilles?

Of course, there is much justice in the answer that could readily be made here, that a more reasonable and practicable manner of spelling should be adopted. This, of course, is unquestionably true: the language is unreasonable and arbitrary and extravagant. Our spelling is a tax upon reader and publisher. But since phonetic spelling is yet hardly more than a name, we must adapt ourselves to things as they are, and find other answers to the problem. The nearest approach to this answer will come by finding out how spelling has suffered from what we teach and from how we teach.

If we compare our school work of today with that of fifty years ago when it was considered wicked or even vulgar, to misspell, we shall find a wide difference. In old times the children learned the "three R's" from cover to cover, with all the fine print and all the exceptions. That, with some geography and some American history, constituted education, unless college preparation were required, when Latin early entered the curriculum and a little algebra came in later on. And these few lessons were studied and mastered as our children seldom study and master theirs today. Very different is our educational method today. Not long ago I had a significant conversation with a parent. I asked about the children's progress. "Oh, they are doing splendidly," she said. "They are thoroughly wide-awake and interested. They are taking electricity and physiography and manual training and drawing and cooking; they know the chemistry of everything they eat. I do wish they could spell, though. They can't write a page without ten or twelve misspelled words." This is what the parent said. I am not finding fault with the varied industries of the present system. Fifty years ago it was the "three R's." Now it is the whole round world—a lesson in far-off star, in wayside blossom, in wave-ridged fossil and fireside cricket. Moreover, besides the variety that so diffuses our pupils' force today, there is the amount of work that is required. A boy or girl entering college now often knows more than a college graduate fifty years ago. Consider what a student of sixteen or seventeen must be master of! He must have the three great Latin classics; the six or eight French classics; centuries of history, from the Flood down to today; algebra and geometry at his fingers' and tongue's ends; an intelligent understanding of one or more natural sciences; and, including collateral building, twenty to thirty English books. Compare this varied and extended course with the one-aimed method of fifty years ago. Something has had to suffer. Has it perhaps been spelling? In this reach after many things, it is not perhaps possible that the student loses his grasp of detail, his thoroughness and exactness? He works so fast and so scatters his energies that he loses his sensitiveness to form, his ability to receive impressions. Have you ever had a student who was surprised when, in an exposition of the paragraph, you showed her that every paragraph in her well-thumbed textbook was indented, and,

in a punctuation lesson, that every quotation in her favorite story-book was put between quotation marks? Have you ever found the pupil who couldn't tell you the name of the author of any English textbook she had ever studied? or—climax of discouragements!—did you ever have a pupil who took such pains with her examination that she misspelled the names clearly written out in the questions? I have had dozens. What is all this failure to see but a result of the diffusion, and hence weakening, of the intellectual force? The aim of the narrow, old-fashioned systems was to do a few things exactly, to impart a certain thing called knowledge. The aim of the modern system is to arouse and inspire, to impart a blessed, dangerous thing called *power*. And now the first query comes: Is power at its highest potency without exactness? And, secondly, is our modern course too varied and too crowded to admit of exactness? And, thirdly, is faulty spelling an evidence of the lack of exactness in the modern system?

And now as to the relation of faulty spelling to how we teach. A few years ago, in an article in the *Atlantic*, President Eliot said that the student of today expects to have his lessons served up to him on a tray, without any effort on his part. The student rings the bell and the teacher sends them up. This assertion justifies the question: Are we instructors not too anxious to make things easy and delightful and appetizing? If we recall the old times, when pinafores, pantalettes little ladies of twelve had to commit dozens of pages of Thomson's *Seasons* and Young's *Night Thoughts* and Cowper's *Task*, we are struck with the difference between those days and today, when a shadow falls upon the class if ten lines are suggested as worthy of memorizing. Of course, in most cases the hailing of "Gentle spring, ethereal mildness" in Thomson's flowing lines, and of "Night, able goddess on her ebon throne," in Young's iambics, was but a parrot-like exercise and a sad waste of time; but no matter how modern we are, we must all bow to the industry that made such mnemonic feats possible. The old way was different from the warmth and light and ease of today's methods; but we would that some of the old habit of work, the old concentration, the old fearlessness and defiance of obstacles were still with us. And in another way this industry and concentration were displayed by our grandparents. In

old times the student was thrown upon his own resources to force his way into a new principle, and then to force the principle into his grasp. In a way, such teaching seems barbarous and unenlightened—as well as unenlightening. And yet, was there not left, after the struggle to understand, a permanent treasure of strength that compensated for the darkness in which the mining had been begun? Of course, the ideal method is one in which the teacher is the illuminator, the inspirer, and the pupil the worker. It is the abuse of this method in making the teacher inspirer, illuminator, and worker, and the pupil the *listener*, that has done harm. Do we abuse the method today? When a theme is given out, we talk it over, we outline it, we suggest tricks of thought. When a new principle is introduced, we illuminate every corner of it, and then turn the class into it to have a good time. This is a pleasant way for both teacher and pupil, but is it unreservedly the better way? Doesn't it perhaps deprive the student of the habit of work, of the determined concentration of the old method? And is it this lack that makes our boys and girls indifferent and careless? Is it this indifference and carelessness that make them faulty spellers? They don't enjoy working over an unilluminated, uncorrelated page of spelling. Even after the teacher has told philological romances about the union of prefix and root and suffix, the words resolve themselves back into words—to be studied. The old method had thus for its aim the forming of habits of work from a plain sense of duty; and the result was unquestioning industry. The new method has for its aim—and a glorious aim it is!—the inciting of the pupil to work, the alluring of his fancy into an appetite for—what? Work or entertainment? And the query is: Is the intellectual appetite permanent and wholesome without this forceful concentration and his willingness to work? And the second query is: Does the modern system arouse this concentration and this industry? And the third is: Is the faulty spelling of today an evidence of this lack of concentration and industry? of this unwillingness to do what isn't easy and entertaining?

Before leaving this phase of the question, the relation of faulty spelling to our method of teaching, a word should be said upon the specific subject of the teaching of spelling. Many educators tell us that when the alphabet died, spelling fell ill. And there is, in the

words of our gentle classroom hero, Sir Roger, "much to be said upon both sides of the question." The old method made its appeal to two senses—to sight and hearing. A recent educational journal, advocating the *sound* method, proves its position by reminding its readers of how quickly the Sousa marches, played by blatant brass bands, took hold of the public memory. In pursuance of this idea, it advocates chanting the spelling lessons. Perhaps the idea contains a glimmer of truth, as most nonsense does. But though the eye is the chief dependence in English orthography, it is unquestionably true that the training of the ear would be of value directly in the spelling of a good many words, like *hopping* and *hoping* and *dining* and *dinning*; and of value indirectly, as an aid to concentration, in the spelling of all words, since two senses instead of one would be fixed upon the task. It is with this latter hope, and not in imitation of Sousa, that I exact, in my classes, the service of both eye and ear.

There is another modern condition which, it seems to me, has a very direct bearing upon our subject. I refer to the superabundance of reading matter. In the days when a man read only the Bible, Milton, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and perhaps the *Morte D'Arthur* and Bacon's *Essays*, those masterpieces were pored over and pondered and made a part of the reader's mind; the "matter of them was labored and distilled through all the needful uses of life." The result was a habit of thoughtful, receptive reading, the effect of which, in turn, was a vividness of mental impression and a wholesome activity of mind. Today our girls and boys skim through half a dozen meaningless romances a week. Nothing sinks in, nothing adheres, and the brain plays almost no part in the process; it is the emotions only that are aware of the passing of the story. The result of such reading is that habits of carelessness and of lack of application are formed, which, in their turn, render the brain indolent and unimpressionable. And now comes the query: Does not such a habit of mind develop a lack of grasp, a flaccidity of mental action? And, again, is not faulty spelling a necessary result of this lack of grasp and this flaccidity of mental action?

If even only a half-affirmative answer be given to the foregoing queries, but one conclusion can follow, and that is, that the faulty spelling of today is no accident, no caprice, but a condition that is a

result. From this conclusion there must follow a question, which, however, should be introduced by a repetition of the queries that have already suggested themselves.

1. Is exactness in detail—and certainly spelling is detail—a necessary sacrifice to power?

2. Are industrious habits of work—and certainly spelling requires industry—necessarily sacrificed to the cultivation of an appetite for knowledge?

3. Are concentration, thoroughness, and mental vigor—and certainly spelling requires concentration, thoroughness, and mental vigor—to be sacrificed to the superficial reading of the times?

4. And, lastly, how can we make what was precious in the imperfect old system—exactness, industry, and concentration—complete the perfection of the new?

And now, as to what the English teacher can do? In a general way, she must stand unflinchingly, unswervingly, and untiringly for exactness and concentration, and must fight against the tendency to slur and to shirk. Specifically I have found it best to introduce spelling-books into all the English classes, and I require a rigid and oft-repeated re-writing of all misspelled words—insisting gently but firmly upon its being a consequence and not a punishment. I have also found old-fashioned “spell downs” very serviceable as an occasional stimulus, and I am under constant obligations to our teachers in other departments for their faithful exactions of correct spelling. As for the teacher’s attitude toward the superficial reading, we cannot do half of what we would do toward bettering that condition; but we can do much to guide and support those who are floundering in the ocean of new books—and this leads up to my next topic.

The attitude of the English teacher toward outside reading depends entirely upon her attitude toward her class work. If she teaches only to put her classes through the college examinations, her duty is easy and clearly defined; she has to see that they prepare the required classics, with a certain amount of rhetoric and collateral reading—and there the responsibility ends. But to the teacher who sees a beyond to her work, the theme-work, the rhetoric exercises, and the required classics are but half of the responsibility. In the English department, in a degree greater than any other, there is a close



relation of life and work. It is with a sort of external consciousness that a pupil counts and calculates, that he dissects a frog, that he pursues a foreign idiom. It is with his most intimate consciousness that he enters into the spiritual, and intellectual life of a great writer in the mother-tongue. In the English room he draws in "the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, treasured up unto a life beyond life." And the teaching of English gives us instructors the nearest contact with the characters of our students. We seem almost to press and mold the ethereal substance of which spirits are made. This power of ours is twofold: it is objective to the pupils in the impressing upon their natures of the thought of the masters whom they studied; it is subjective to them—and hence more delicate—in the expressing of their own thoughts. By means of this power,

"We instruct mankind,  
To find man's veritable stature out,  
Erect, sublime, the measure of a man,  
And that's the measure of an angel, says the Apostle."

If we realize this quite peculiar and distinctive responsibility that rests upon us as teachers of English, we shall readily admit that we have a serious duty, not only toward school and college, but also toward anything that makes for character-building—toward life itself.

The outside reading of our boys and girls threatens both scholarship and character. A whole army of bloodless but fascinating heroes and heroines—ephemeral beings—is invading the domains of the everlasting flesh-and-blood creations of the masters. These new friends are merry comrades; they are not exacting; they entertain, and expect nothing from their entertainers except an occasional smile or tear. Moreover, they always have interesting love-stories, which they tell without any pauses for explanation or description or analysis, which the reader would like to skip. But, besides these book-people who are merely lifeless and trivial, there are the men and the women out of the problem-stories, with their sins and their sorrows. They are so beautiful and so sad and so poetic that their sins lose their unloveliness and become only unfortunate mistakes or tragic injustice. They are more exacting than the other literary guests, and require the young hosts and hostesses to

weep with them, and often to take their part against the cold-hearted criticism of prosaic older people. From these two broadly outlined classes of temptation come the classifications into which the reading problem falls—the mental danger and the moral danger. As Mr. Hudson says, in his work *On the Teaching of English*:

This world is getting full of devils—very potent ones, too—in the shape of foolish and bad books. And I am disposed to think the foolish devils in that shape even worse than the wicked, for they only begin the work of evil somewhat further off so as to come at it the more surely; and a slow, creeping infection is more dangerous than a frank assault.

These foolish devils make the mental danger. They swarm into our daily lives. There is the love-story veneered with history, the love-story diluted with a purpose, the love-story sky-rocketed with the improbable, the love-story veiled with the occult, the love-story bared into realism. Mr. Harrison, aptly, if somewhat broadly, says, that to ask a man who has been “sucking” magazines and love-stories to read a good book is like expecting a butcher boy to whistle “Adelaïde.”

Such reading—harmless as it may sometimes be morally—has, mentally, two distinctly evil effects: it encourages indolent mental habits, as I have already said, and, further, it destroys the dawning critical sense. The young reader finds it much pleasanter to be entertained than to be aroused. A broad thread of love, strung with racy, often slangy, conversation, and an occasional adventure, is much more delightful than a plot that requires untangling from descriptions and analysis; or than the comparing of characters that do nothing seemingly but make involved iambic pentameter speeches. So the foolish devils are made friends with because they are easy companions; the angels and ministers of light are barred out because they seem hard to get acquainted with. The critical sense of the young readers is entirely centered in the love-story. If I may trifle with Dr. Holmes’s famous joke, unless there is an “I love you” to be said, a book is like a fire-cracker on the fifth of July. And the query is: What can we English teachers do to combat the mental danger? How can we make our pupils scorn the false and love the true?

The moral danger of indiscriminate reading has been so often the theme of preacher and teacher and parent that nothing further can

be said. But there is one phase of the subject of which it is well for us to remind ourselves. There is a serious moral danger often in a perfectly moral book. The constant appeal to the emotional nature of a young person cannot but have harmful results. This reading and rereading of love-stories arouses a morbid and unyouthful interest in sentimental subjects, breaks down the frank, wholesome comradeship between boys and girls, and builds up a tissue of foolish dreams which distort the serious realities of life. The emotional nature grows at the expense of the intellectual nature, instead of there being a balance of power.

Indeed, "souls are dangerous things to carry straight, through all the spilt saltpetre of the world." And the query is: How can we English teachers give moral balance to our students? How can we ward off or counteract, by our teaching, the moral harm that comes from trivial as well as from wicked books?

"Sublimest danger, over which none weeps,  
When any young, wayfaring soul goes forth  
Alone, unconscious of the perilous road,  
The day-sun dazzling in his limpid eyes,  
To thrust his own way, he an alien,  
Through the world of books."

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#### "DIE NEUEREN SPRACHEN"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Read at the conference of the Germanic Department.